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A NOTE ON THE ART
OF MEZZOTINT . . .
AND . . .
MEZZOTINT PRINTING
IN COLOURS . . .
BY
A. C. DICKINS. . .

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AN EARLY NOTE ON
MEZZOTINT.

FROM THE DIARY OF JOHN EVELYN.

February 21, 1654.

“Prince Rupert first showed me how to engrave in the Mezzo-tinto manner.”

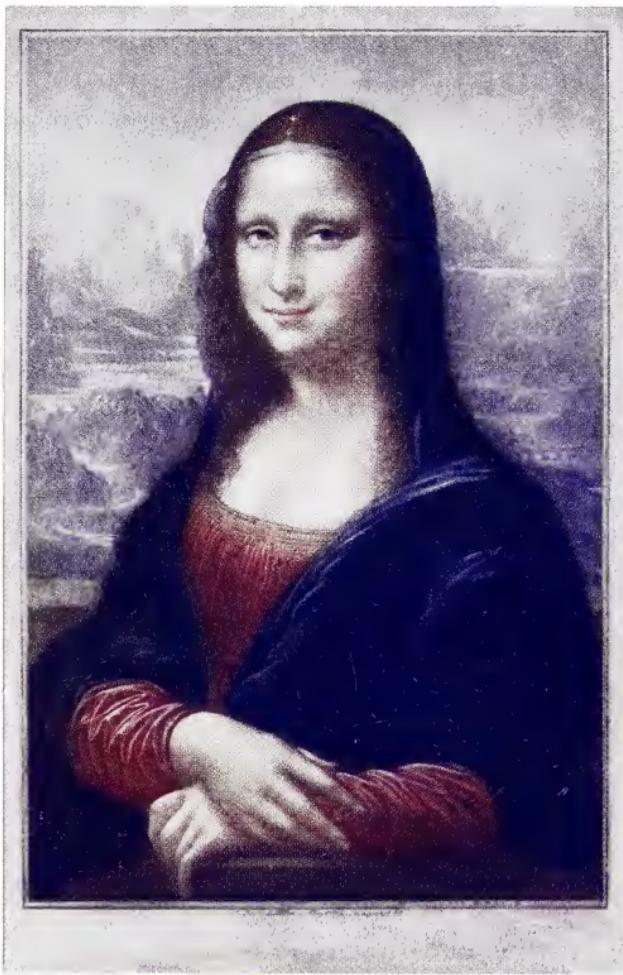
March 9, 1654.

“This afternoon Prince Rupert showed me with his own hands the new way of graving, called mezzo-tinto, which afterwards by his permission I published in my History of Chalcography. This set so many artists on work that they soon arrived to the perfection it has since come to, emulating the tenderest miniatures.”

A SHORT NOTE ON THE HISTORY OF MEZZOTINT.

THE Art of Mezzo-tinto (half-tones) although it found its existence originally in Holland and Germany, has, through the centuries become an art purely English. If one excepts the few whose names are associated with its inception and early improvement, there are none whose art during the last two hundred years, stands out by comparison with the work as such men as McArdell, Say, Dickinson, Walker, Valentine Green, J. R. Smith and the brothers Ward, and others equally prominently associated with the eighteenth century; or with Charles Turner, S. W. Reynolds and Samuel Cousins of more recent date. But at first, to give a glance at its earliest introduction, we have to turn to the pages of Dutch history.

Ludwig von Siegen, a Dutchman, serving as an officer under the Landgrave of Hesse, was the originator of the process, and in 1642, some twelve years before its appearance in England, executed a portrait of the Regent Mother, Amelia Elizabeth. The groundwork of this plate, several impressions of which may be seen in the British Museum, was very lightly made, and in the engraver's own words "only a few prints could be made because of the extreme delicacy of the plate." For several years Van Siegen kept his discovery a secret, during that time executing several plates.



MONA LISA—from the Mezzotint printed in Colours by F. G. STEVENSON after LEONARDO DA VINCI published by H. C. DICKINS 26 Regent Street, London.

Twelve years later, in 1654, he taught his art (at Brussels) to Prince Rupert, the versatile son of Elizabeth, Queen of Bohemia. The Prince was greatly attracted by the invention and soon mastered its technical difficulties, executing his own great plate of the Executioner in 1658. While on a visit to England, Prince Rupert shewed his secret to John Evelyn, and allowed him to use one of his plates as a frontispiece to his work on engraving. From that date mezzotint became firmly established in England, and some twenty years after was generally known as "La Maniere Anglaise."

As the art of engraving in stipple had become the peculiar forte of the engravers of Italy; Germany, the home of the best of the early line engravers, and as France had produced the most delicate of reproductive etchers, so England has gradually improved, monopolised and perfected the simplest and yet most perfect of all the engraving arts, superior to any of the others in its exquisite softness of tone, and smoothness of grain.

MEZZOTINT OF THE GEORGIAN PERIOD.

A great deal of the perfection which Mezzotint has attained since its earliest date, is due to the progress which was made by the engravers of the eighteenth century. Patronised and encouraged by such men as Sir Joshua Reynolds, John Hoppner, Thos. Gainsborough, Sir Thos. Lawrence, and the other great masters of the English revival, the engravers of that period were always busily employed. In the days when photography was still unknown, the desire for presentation portraits of important personages, brought work steadily to the engravers. At that date they worked under many disadvantages which to-day have been minimised by the experience they have gained. The preparation of the copper plates was not carefully studied, and the hammering process of to-day, which renders the copper plates so much firmer to resist the wear, strain, and pressure of the printing-press, was comparatively unknown, the plates, in consequence, being literally worn out when an edition of but thirty proofs had been taken. Even with so small an edition, two guineas was an exceptional price for an impression, and most of the fine old prints were originally offered to the public by the engravers themselves at from fifteen to twenty-five shillings, including the best plates of the famous J. R. Smith.

THE PRINTS IN COLOURS OF YESTERDAY AND TO-DAY.

GENERALLY speaking, prints in mezzotint in colours were not appreciated until within quite recent date. This reason for their early unpopularity is not far to seek. In the early days, even at such small prices as were then the rule, mezzotints appealed to a very small circle of collectors, or the owners of the original pictures themselves. The first states having been printed, left the plates as we have already seen, much the worse for wear, and then the plates were used again, proofs being pulled in colours as they were found to shew less the decay of the engraved surface. In comparison with the black-and-white proofs of the day they were necessarily much inferior, and accepted, no doubt, with that relative distinction of work which we to-day place between a fine signed proof and an ordinary print state with the title engraved.

From the methods of yesterday let us now turn our attention to the work that is being done to-day. If one excludes the historic interest, and the dignity of colour tone that age alone can give, the modern mezzotint work of such men as F. G. Stevenson, E. Gulland, H. Sedcole, and others, apart from its interest as the revival of a very beautiful art, has this one great advantage—their work is engraved in mezzotint exclusively with the object of printing



MRS. SCOTT MONCRIEFF—from the Mezzotint
printed in Colours by E. GULLAND after Sir H.
RAEBURN published by H. C. DICKINS 26 Regent
Street, London.

proofs in colour. This is an all important point, as we shall see later in watching the progress of a plate, and will give to the best work of to-day a position in the future which cannot be compared with the relative position occupied by the old colour-prints to-day.

The sombre tones of a Rembrandt, the rich brocades of a Vandyck, the simple and dignified tones of the Italian Masters of the Renaissance, the wonderful richness of colours in the little Masters of the Dutch and German Schools, the artificial luxury and the gaiety of the French Masters of the eighteenth century, and the quiet refinement of the works of the English School of the same period, are all capable of their best translation in that wonderful smooth evengrained surface that a well ground plate affords.

THE MAKING OF THE PLATE.

LAYING THE GROUND.

THE plate is of copper, and has first been strengthened by being continually hammered until the requisite hardness best suited to the artist for the particular subject he has in hand to engrave has been obtained. The "ground" is then laid. That is to say, a hand tool, called a rocker, is worked upon the smooth surface of the copper plate in all directions. The tool, which has hard metal teeth, not unlike a comb, roughens the copper, giving it an uneven surface, appearing when viewed through a glass not unlike a field very evenly ploughed. This is a tedious process of weeks of steady application, and the fineness or breadth of the "ground" has to be carefully judged by the mezzotinter, according to the quality of surface which his subject may require. For example, the fine work necessary in a plate of the Italian school would need a delicate and close "ground," the work of strength and breadth which we see in the best of Hoppner's or Raeburn's pictures has need of a wider, broader, and more atmospheric grain.

At this stage the outline of the subject in hand has to be drawn to scale upon the plate. Not a little difficulty presents itself here, as will be readily seen, the mezzotint having to be engraved the opposite way round, in order that the plate may reproduce the subject in the same position as the original.

THE PLATE IN PROGRESS.

THE drawing is now completed, and the work of scraping begins. From absolute blackness “ground” is gradually scraped away up through half-tones to “light.” The “high-lights” being scraped to most perfection reveal the surface of the plate smooth and shining. The hand scraping upon the hardened metal is very lengthy, requiring exquisite patience and knowledge of draughtmanship—and it is here that the perfection of the mezzotinter’s art lies. The amount of scraping for the best rendering of the required colour effects has also to be carefully judged, as a mistake may entail the laying of a fresh “ground.” In order that the copper may hold the colour to the best advantage a plate is not so highly finished as it would be were black-and-white proofs to be the final state. As an instance of this the destroyed proofs of most of Mr. Stevenson’s engravings, which are to be seen in the New York Library, and also the original plate of his “Maid of Honour,” after Peyronneau, show excellently the state beyond which it is dangerous to go.

While scraping continues an occasional trial proof is pulled by the engraver and the more delicate details, such as the rounding of a cheek or the expression of an eye, are perfected; this accomplished to the engraver’s satisfaction the plate is ready to be proved in colours.



The above illustrates the first stage of the mezzotinters work. It is the pencil drawing from the original picture, drawn to the scale required by the size of the plate.

THE PRINTER'S ART.

LAYING THE COLOURS.

ALTHOUGH the foregoing short note on the progress of a plate pretends but to give a broad and simple view of the mezzotinter's art, there are many more delicate and technical points which have been omitted, as they are largely practices and specialities of each individual engraver, based on his own experiences and best suited to his own artistic taste. The same remarks apply in some degree to the manner of printing. But in both of these matters the differences do not affect the methods adopted in the main and are the subject of study for the connoisseur, rather than the casual amateur.

The copper plate is now ready to print. Having been thoroughly cleaned of the wax, used to keep the copper free from atmospheric effects, it is placed on a small stove kept at an even and moderate heat ; the colours required for use in the printing are carefully mixed up on a palette with a preparation of boiled oil, just as in painting. The plate now well warmed, is first covered all over with a ground colour of a tone of brown black or grey ink as may be required by the lightness or heaviness of the subject to be printed, or by the condition of the scraping of the plate. This is afterwards carefully wiped away and cleaned off, leaving only a very little ground colour still in the

deeper furrows of the less scraped parts. The colours are then each applied carefully in the same way and wiped out again as the experience of the artist-printer may decide. The plate, all this time being kept warm, the colours are kept moist and prevented from drying. After the larger surfaces have been treated, much care has to be taken in the details and small colourings, such as the face, eyes, mouth, details of ornament, and the artist's skill is brought into most play here in judging when he has the effect he desires, a by no means easy matter when the canvas, so to speak, is a bright shining metal. The finer details are generally painted on the plate with a fine brush or stumping pencil, it is again thoroughly cleaned with fine cloths, silks, and finally the palm of the hand, and is now ready for the printer's press.

PULLING THE PROOF.

THE plate is now laid face upwards upon the bed of the press, and the paper which is to receive the impression—having previously been dampened—is laid upon its face.

The hand press is set in motion and the plate and paper pass slowly under the rollers which are covered with very thick blanketing. The great pressure forces the paper into the plate and the coloured inks are transferred—giving one impression.

The same trouble and care must be given to

each proof, the plate being cleaned and prepared *de novo* for every impression of the edition. Simple as this may sound, it is, in fact, a most difficult, and uncertain process. How often a slight uncertainty produces appalling results; a smeared cheek, a squinting eye, a hard mouth, an overlapping of some colour here, the want of it there; and until the artist-printer has proved to a nicety the strength and weakness of his plate, the results are time after time unsatisfactory and defective.

So many things come into consideration in the matter of printing which would escape the notice of all but the experienced, and one of the most trying of all is that of the daylight. One day it is bright, one day it is dull, and when viewed together the impressions taken on each day are quite different, and probably in so marked a degree that at least one of them will be quite useless. How many people ever think of the actual number of proofs pulled, before a small edition of one hundred and fifty perfect proofs are ready for distribution?

The edition being now pulled, the plate is scarred across to be rendered useless, some rough proofs are pulled in black-and-white, as evidence of its destruction, and the plate passes into the limbo of forgotten things.

A.C.D.

L'ENVOI.

The foregoing short notes, to help those who are collectors to a more ready understanding of the art of mezzotint and the methods of colour printing, will, it is hoped, have served in some measure to show the difficulties which have to be surmounted before a finished proof is put before them ; and will help them to better appreciate how deserving of a real success is a process so artistic and delicate. The work of an engraver and printer who can overcome all these difficulties and produce a beautiful piece of colour work such as we have seen from time to time during the past few years, must live. And there is no room to doubt, when the more interesting facts in this artistic production become more widely known, the permanent and high position which this beautiful process will occupy among the arts of the future.

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